

McCain: A Question of Temperament

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Sunday, April 20, 2008; Page A01

[John McCain](#) cupped a fist and began pumping it, up and down, along the side of his body. It was a gesture familiar to a participant in the closed-door meeting of the Senate committee who hoped that it merely signaled, as it sometimes had in the past, McCain's mounting frustration with one of his colleagues.

But when McCain leaned toward [Charles E. Grassley](#) and slowly said, "My friend . . ." it seemed clear that ugliness was looming: While the plural "my friends" was usually a warm salutation from McCain, "my friend" was often a prelude to his most caustic attacks. Grassley, an Iowa Republican with a reputation as an unwavering legislator, calmly held his ground. McCain became angrier, his fist pumping even faster.

It was early 1992, and the occasion was an informal gathering of a select committee investigating lingering issues about Vietnam War prisoners and those missing in action, most notably whether any American servicemen were still being held by the Vietnamese. It is unclear precisely what issue set off McCain that day. But at some point, he mocked Grassley to his face and used a profanity to describe him. Grassley stood and, according to two participants at the meeting, told McCain, "I don't have to take this. I think you should apologize."

McCain refused and stood to face Grassley. "There was some shouting and shoving between them, but no punches," recalls a spectator, who said that Nebraska Democrat Bob Kerrey helped break up the altercation.

Grassley said recently that "it was a very long period of time" before he and McCain spoke to each other again, though he declined, through a spokesman, to discuss the specifics of the incident.

Since the beginning of McCain's public life, the many witnesses to his temper have had strikingly different reactions to it. Some depict McCain, now the presumptive Republican nominee for president, as an erratic hothead incapable of staying cool in the face of what he views as either disloyalty to him or irrational opposition to his ideas. Others praise a firebrand who is resolute against the forces of greed and gutlessness.

"Does he get angry? Yes," said [Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman](#), a Connecticut independent who supports McCain's presidential bid. "But it's never been enough to blur his judgment. . . . If anything, his passion and occasional bursts of anger have made him

more effective."

Former senator Bob Smith, a New Hampshire Republican, expresses worries about McCain: "His temper would place this country at risk in international affairs, and the world perhaps in danger. In my mind, it should disqualify him."

A spokesman for McCain's campaign said he would be unavailable for an interview on the subject of his temper. But over the years, no one has written more intimately about McCain's outbursts than McCain himself. "My temper has often been both a matter of public speculation and personal concern," he wrote in a 2002 memoir. "I have a temper, to state the obvious, which I have tried to control with varying degrees of success because it does not always serve my interest or the public's."

That temper has followed him throughout his life, McCain acknowledges. He recalls in his writings how, as a toddler, he sometimes held his breath and fainted during moments of fury. As the son of a naval officer who was on his way to becoming a four-star admiral, McCain found himself frequently uprooted and enrolled in new schools, where, as an underappreciated outsider, he developed "a little bit of a chip on my shoulder," as he recalled this month.

During a campaign stop at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, the most famous graduate of the Class of 1954 opened a window on what swirled inside him during his school years. "I was always the new kid and was accustomed to proving myself quickly at each new school as someone not to be challenged lightly," he told students.

"As a young man, I would respond aggressively and sometimes irresponsibly to anyone who I perceived to have questioned my sense of honor and self-respect. Those responses often got me in a fair amount of trouble earlier in life."

He defied authority, ridiculed other students, sometimes fought. The nicknames hung on him at Episcopal mocked his hair-trigger feistiness: "Punk" and "McNasty." Hoping to emulate his father and grandfather, also an admiral, he went on to the Naval Academy, where his pattern of unruliness and defiance continued, landing him near the bottom of his class. "I acted like a jerk," McCain wrote of the period before he righted himself to become a naval aviator, a Vietnam POW and eventually a career politician.

The trajectory of his temper, studied ever more intently as his White House ambitions took shape, includes incidents from his years in the House and in the Senate, leading up to the early days of his current presidential campaign. In 2007, during a heated closed-door discussion with Senate colleagues about the contentious immigration issue, he angrily shouted a profanity at a fellow Republican, [John Cornyn](#) of Texas, an incident that quickly found its way into headlines.

Reports recently surfaced of [Rep. Rick Renzi](#), an Arizona Republican, taking offense when McCain called him "boy" once too often during a 2006 meeting, a story that McCain aides confirm while playing down its importance. "Renzi flared and he was prickly," McCain strategist Mark Salter said. "But there were no punches thrown or anything."

'Everyone Has a Temper'

According to aides, McCain's frequent comments about his temperament reflect a recognition that the issue persists for some voters and the media. At times he expresses regret about his temper, often tracing it to the same resentments that ignited him as a boy: "In all candor, as an adult I've been known to forget occasionally the discretion expected of a person of my many years and station when I believe I've been accorded a lack of respect I did not deserve," he said at Episcopal.

On other occasions, he has contended that his blowups have served a purpose. In a recent interview with CNN, while referring to his temper as "a very minor thing," McCain declared that voters occasionally want him to vent: "When I see corruption, . . . when I see people misbehaving badly, they expect me to" be angry.

Salter, who has co-written five books with McCain that, among other things, explore the origins of his feistiness, said he thinks McCain's temper first became an issue after an incident in 1989, during McCain's first term in the Senate.

The nomination of a beleaguered John Tower to become defense secretary was already in trouble when [Sen. Richard C. Shelby](#) of Alabama, a conservative Democrat who later became a Republican, helped doom it by voting against Tower. A furious McCain, believing that Shelby had reneged on a commitment of support, accosted him, got within an inch of his nose and screamed at him. News of the incident swiftly spread around the Capitol.

"I think it started there," Salter said, though by 1989, many of McCain's colleagues had already heard stories about other eruptions during his two terms in the House.

Part of the paradox of McCain is that many of the old targets of his volcanic temper are now his campaign contributors. Former Phoenix mayor Paul Johnson is one example. In 1992, during a private meeting of Arizona officials over a federal land issue that affected the state, a furious McCain openly questioned Johnson's honesty. "Start a tape recorder -- it's best when you get a liar on tape," McCain said to others in the meeting, according to an account of their "nose-to-nose, testosterone-filled" argument that Johnson later provided to reporters.

But Johnson, who once was quoted as saying that he thought McCain was "in the area

of being unstable," today says that he has mellowed, citing a 2006 face-to-face apology that he said he received from his old adversary. "He's not the same guy, as far as I'm concerned," Johnson said. "And nothing has happened during the course of this year's campaign."

Cornyn is now a McCain supporter, as is Republican [Sen. Thad Cochran](#) of Mississippi, himself a past target of McCain's sharp tongue, especially over what McCain regarded as Cochran's hunger for pork-barrel projects in his state. Cochran landed in newspapers early during the campaign after declaring that the thought of McCain in the Oval Office "sends a cold chill down my spine."

Indeed, aside from a single testy exchange in March with New York Times reporter Elisabeth Bumiller over whether he had had a conversation in 2004 with Democratic [Sen. John F. Kerry](#) about being his running mate -- a tape of which appeared immediately on YouTube -- McCain has been noticeably unflappable throughout the primaries. Advisers posit that his temperament ought to be a dead issue.

"Everyone has a temper . . . but there has been no evidence of a temper problem here," said Rick Davis, McCain's campaign manager. "In our campaign, he has done give-and-take with people everywhere, regardless if someone agrees or disagrees with him. There is no more probing process than a presidential campaign. He has performed well under the most intense kind of pressure."

Friends and Enemies

McCain has been down this road before. During his 2000 presidential run, responding in part to questions about his temper and what effect, if any, his 5 1/2 years as a POW had on his psyche, he released about 1,500 pages of his medical and psychiatric records, which presented a clean bill of mental health.

"I'm not saying he doesn't have a temper, but it's governable," Salter said. "When he has a heated argument, it's usually with one of his peers, who are unaccustomed to being addressed that way by anyone, really. Sometimes he can't govern his tongue. He's just blunt -- he's a straightforward person."

McCain has built much of his appeal, especially with independents, as the fiery maverick willing to defy both parties. His tempestuousness has girded him in high-stakes confrontations, especially against Republican conservatives who regard his occasionally moderate stances as proof that he has sold them out.

"You will damn well do this. You will make this a holiday. You're making us look like fools," he privately exploded two decades ago at a stunned group of Arizona Republicans who opposed creating a state holiday in remembrance of the Rev. Martin

Luther King Jr.

Early during their days together in the Senate, Smith came to believe that McCain often used his temper as a strategic weapon, that if he "couldn't persuade you, he was going at least to needle you or [sometimes] belittle you or blow up into trying to have you believe you were beneath him, so that you'd be less likely to challenge him. He needed to be the top guy."

Smith admits to not liking McCain, a point he has often made over the years to reporters. "I've witnessed a lot of his temper and outbursts," Smith said. "For me, some of this stuff is relevant. It raises questions about stability. . . . It's more than just temper. It's this need of his to show you that he's above you -- a sneering, condescending attitude. It's hurt his relationships in Congress. . . . I've seen it up-close."

Smith, whose service in the Navy included a tour on the waters in and around Vietnam, said he stood stunned one day when McCain declared around several of their colleagues that Smith wasn't a real Vietnam War veteran. "I was in the combat zone, off the Mekong River, for 10 months," Smith said. "He went on to insult me several times. I wasn't on the land; I guess that was his reasoning. . . . He suggested I was masquerading about my Vietnam service. It was very hurtful. He's gotten to a lot of people [that way]."

While in the course of a policy disagreement at a luncheon meeting of Republican senators, McCain reportedly insulted [Pete V. Domenici](#) of New Mexico with an earthy expletive. Domenici demanded an apology. "Okay, I'll apologize," McCain said, before referring to an infuriated Domenici with the same expletive.

Salter insists that many of McCain's run-ins with colleagues and activists have resulted from McCain's conviction that his honor in some way has been questioned. "If he feels a challenge to his integrity, then he'll say something," Salter said. "If he thinks you betrayed him . . . he'll tell you, he'll be angry. . . . But he's also exceedingly forgiving."

During the early 1990s, McCain telephoned the office of Tom Freestone, a governmental official little known outside Arizona's Maricopa County. McCain had an unusual request. He wanted Freestone, then chairman of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, to reject a job applicant named Karen S. Johnson, whose last governmental position had been in the office of a former Arizona governor and who had just interviewed for a position as an aide in Freestone's office.

According to two employees in the office, McCain told Freestone that the applicant's past political associations left her carrying unflattering baggage.

The pair of Freestone staffers thought it odd that a U.S. senator would even know that

Johnson had applied for a job in their office, let alone that he had taken time out of his workday to pick up a phone and weigh in on a staffing matter so removed from the locus of Washington power. But McCain's disenchantment with Johnson was personal: A few years earlier, he had an angry exchange with her while she was the secretary for Republican Arizona Gov. Evan Meacham, who was impeached and forced out of office for campaign finance violations.

Around the time of Meacham's ouster, Johnson said, McCain paid a visit to him. Johnson recalled that McCain swiftly used the opportunity to lecture Meacham: "You should never have been elected. You're an embarrassment to the [Republican] Party."

A stupefied Meacham just stared at the senator. An indignant Johnson, as she tells the story, snapped at McCain: "How dare you? You're the embarrassment to the party."

As Johnson and another person working in Freestone's office remember, the surprised supervisor told Johnson about McCain's objections to her. "But I'm hiring you anyway," Freestone told her.

For Johnson, McCain's call raised questions as to whether he bore a lasting animosity against anyone who ever challenged him. "Everyone in [Freestone's] office thought it was all ridiculous . . . and petty," remembers Johnson, a devout Republican conservative who today is an Arizona state senator.

"Senator McCain says he has no recollection of ever making a phone call to block a job for Karen Johnson," Salter said.

During roughly the same period, McCain requested the firing of an aide to Arizona's senior U.S. senator, Dennis DeConcini, according to two top figures in DeConcini's office.

The aide, a veterans affairs expert named Judy Leiby, first ran into problems with McCain in the late '80s, when she sought to correct what she regarded as a McCain misstatement about DeConcini's record on a veterans issue. She was attending a Phoenix meeting between McCain and some veterans when she rebutted a McCain assertion that DeConcini, a Democrat, favored a bill that included a cut of some veterans benefits. "That is incorrect," Leiby said, detailing the specifics of DeConcini's position as McCain listened stonily.

Sometime afterward, McCain called DeConcini and asked that he dismiss Leiby, insisting to the senator that his aide had become a toxic, partisan figure. According to the two people in the office, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, DeConcini defended Leiby and, praising what he characterized as her bipartisan fairness and expertise, urged McCain to give her a second look. McCain refused, repeating his

demand that Leiby be fired.

DeConcini "politely told McCain to go to hell," according to a source close to the conversation, adding: "Not once in [DeConcini's 18-year Senate tenure] did another senator ask for an aide to be dismissed. Not once did anyone speak about an aide like that."

Episodes such as the Johnson and Leiby incidents, along with McCain's oft-chronicled blowups on Capitol Hill, have led critics to say he has a vindictive streak, that he sees an enemy in anyone who challenges him.

"I heard about his temper more from others," said Grant Woods, McCain's first congressional chief of staff, who is generally regarded as McCain's closest confidant in his early political years. "According to them, he really unleashed on some of them, and they couldn't figure out why. . . . It happened enough that it was affecting his credibility with some people. If you wanted a programmed, subdued, always-on-message politician, he wasn't and will never be your guy."

Woods helped orchestrate McCain's first House campaign in 1982 and worked to get him elected to the Senate in 1986. That year the Arizona Republican Party held its Election Night celebration for all its candidates at a Phoenix hotel, where the triumphant basked in the cheers of their supporters and delivered victory statements on television.

After McCain finished his speech, he returned to a suite in the hotel, sat down in front of a TV and viewed a replay of his remarks, angry to discover that the speaking platform had not been erected high enough for television cameras to capture all of his face -- he seemed to have been cut off somewhere between his nose and mouth.

A platform that had been adequate for taller candidates had not taken into account the needs of the 5-foot-9 McCain, who left the suite and went looking for a man in his early 20s named [Robert Wexler](#), the head of Arizona's Young Republicans, which had helped make arrangements for the evening's celebration. Confronting Wexler in a hotel ballroom, McCain exploded, according to witnesses who included Jon Hinz, then executive director of the Arizona Republican Party. McCain jabbed an index finger in Wexler's chest.

"I told you we needed a stage," he screamed, according to Hinz. "You incompetent little [expletive]. When I tell you to do something, you do it."

Hinz recalls intervening, placing his 6-foot-6 frame between the senator-elect and the young volunteer. "John, this is not the time or place for this," Hinz remembers saying to McCain, who fumed that he hadn't been seen clearly by television viewers. Hinz

recollects finally telling McCain: "John, look, I'll follow you out on stage myself next time. I'll make sure everywhere you go there is a milk crate for you to stand on. But this is enough."

McCain spun around on his heels and left. He did not talk to Hinz again for several years. In 2000, as Hinz recalls, he appeared briefly on the Christian Broadcasting Network to voice his worries about McCain's temperament on televangelist Pat Robertson's show, "The 700 Club." Hinz's concerns have since grown with reports of incidents in and out of Arizona.

In 1994, McCain tried to stop a primary challenge to the state's Republican governor, J. Fife Symington III, by telephoning his opponent, Barbara Barrett, the well-heeled spouse of a telecommunications executive, and warning of unspecified "consequences" should she reject his advice to drop out of the race. Barrett stayed in. At that year's state Republican convention, McCain confronted Sandra Dowling, the Maricopa County school superintendent and, according to witnesses, angrily accused her of helping to persuade Barrett to enter the race.

"You better get [Barrett] out or I'll destroy you," a witness claims that McCain shouted at her. Dowling responded that if McCain couldn't respect her right to support whomever she chose, that he "should get the hell out of the Senate." McCain shouted an obscenity at her, and Dowling howled one back.

Woods raced over, according to a witness, and pulled Dowling away. Woods said he has "no memory" of being involved, "though I heard something about an argument."

"What happens if he gets angry in crisis" in the presidency?" Hinz asked. "It's difficult enough to be a negotiator, but it's almost impossible when you're the type of guy who's so angry at anybody who doesn't do what he wants. It's the president's job to negotiate and stay calm. I don't see that he has that quality."

Having reunited with his old boss after a falling out in the '90s, Woods is back on board. Barbara Barrett, too. Other Arizona Republicans, once spurned or alienated from McCain, have accepted invitations to rejoin him, though not Sandra Dowling or Jon Hinz, who said, "I've just seen too much. That temper, the intolerance: It worries me."

How Big a Factor?

Historians are generally ambivalent over whether hot-tempered leaders have fared any worse than the placid. Harry S. Truman once threatened bodily harm in a letter to a reviewer who wrote disparagingly about the musical talents of his daughter. Richard M. Nixon ranted, and so did Bill Clinton. George Stephanopoulos once described Clinton's "purple rages," which left Stephanopoulos, often the subject of Clinton's private

lashings, so shaken that he broke out in hives, sunk into depression and began taking an antidepressant.

"Clinton could flare up," remembers John D. Podesta, a former Clinton chief of staff. "You might have to endure five minutes of him yelling. But you could challenge him. . . . He would sometimes get mad when [aides] pushed back -- but it was a passing moment; tomorrow would be fine. You didn't get in the doghouse for pushing back."

"Temper can sometimes be a political instrument," said James A. Thurber, director of the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University. "There are sometimes calculated displays of temper, which is what Lyndon Johnson used to persuade people. . . .

"But sometimes somebody's temperament can get in the way of aides telling him the truth, which happened [during the Vietnam War] with LBJ. His temper scared some [aides] away, which was not good for anyone. . . . That's always part of the risk with a strong temper . . . and so it's always relevant."

After his failed 2000 presidential campaign against George W. Bush, McCain sensed the political cost of his temperament. During a debate, he had snapped at Bush: "You should be ashamed. . . . You should be ashamed." In May 2006, he told CNN: "My anger didn't help my campaign. It didn't help. People don't like angry candidates very much."

McCain's defenders today include an old nemesis -- Grassley.

"It doesn't mean I'm buddy-buddy with McCain," the senator said recently. "He may have a short fuse. . . . But I've come to the conclusion that his strong principles, sometimes backed up by considerable" -- Grassley paused -- "not temper, but considerable conviction, is what a president ought to have."

One man's bulldozer is another's bully. "I don't think that he forgets anyone who ever opposed him, that he can ever really respect or trust them again," said Karen Johnson, the targeted secretary-turned-state senator. "That goes for people here and overseas."