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**The Weekly Update from *Media Matters for America*
by Jamison Foser**

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The media's hero

In the past week, *The New York Times* has [described](#) John McCain as "a Vietnam hero and national security pro." The Associated Press has [referred](#) to McCain's "Vietnam War-hero biography." UPI has [referred](#) to him as "the 71-year-old Vietnam hero." *The Boston Globe* [called](#) McCain "a 71-year-old war hero." *The Buffalo News* combined the two descriptions, [describing](#) McCain as "a 71-year-old Vietnam War hero." And *Newsweek* [declared](#) McCain "a war hero who is fun to be around."

(Such casual invocations of McCain's war record are far from new. Two examples: In 2003, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* sneaked a reference to McCain's Vietnam service into the beginning of an article about his efforts to ban gambling on the NCAA basketball tournament. In August 2000, the *Chicago Tribune* shoehorned McCain's status as a former prisoner of war into a brief article -- just 157 words -- about his skin cancer.)

The week's most intense focus on McCain's status as a war hero came on MSNBC following his appearance with President Bush at the White House. As the blogger Digby [noted](#), MSNBC's Brian Williams and Chris Matthews gushed over McCain:

WILLIAMS: You know what I thought was unsaid -- they took their position, Chris, we're seeing the replay -- they end up in this spot and the sun is coming is just from the side and there in the shadow is John McCain's buckled, concave shoulder. It's a part of his body the suit doesn't fill out because of his war injuries. Again you wouldn't spot it unless you knew to look for it. He doesn't give the same full chested profile as the president standing next to him. Talk about a *warrior*...

MATTHEWS: You know, when he was a prisoner all those years, as you know, in isolation from his fellows, I do believe, uhm, and Machiavelli had this right -- it's not sentimental, it's *factual* -- the more you give to something, the more you become committed to it. That's true of marriage and children and everything we've committed to in our lives. He committed to his country over there. He made an investment in America, alone in that cell, when he was being tortured and afraid of being put to death at any moment -- and turning down a chance to come home.

Those are non-political facts which I think do work for him. When it gets close this November, which I do believe, and you likely agree, will be a very close contest between him and whoever wins the Democratic fight. And I think people will look at that *fact*, that here's a man who has invested deeply, and physically and personally in his country.

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. Couldn't agree more. Of course the son of a Navy Admiral, a product of Annapolis who couldn't wait to become a Navy aviator...

Williams acknowledged that "you wouldn't spot" McCain's war injury if he hadn't pointed it out. Indeed, McCain's war record [didn't come up](#), even in passing, during his appearance with Bush. There was no reminder of it in anything Bush or McCain said -- and, as Williams

acknowledged, there was no visual indication of it, either. Williams and Matthews brought it up out of the blue.

So what's wrong with bringing McCain's status as a war hero up out of the blue, as Williams and Matthews did, as many other news reports did this week? Or even as the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* and *Chicago Tribune* did in articles about gambling on the NCAA tournament and skin cancer? McCain is, after all, a war hero; everybody agrees about that. There isn't anything wrong with Brian Williams and Chris Matthews talking about that.

But Matthews and Williams then agreed, in essence, that John McCain is more "committed" to America than Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. And that the "non-political facts" of McCain's service to his country will have very real political impact.

Well, it certainly will if Chris Matthews and Brian Williams keep telling voters that McCain is more "committed" to America and more "invested ... physically and personally in his country" than his Democratic opponent. That isn't journalism; it's taking sides.

And that illustrates what is troubling about the media's tendency to invoke McCain's admirable service at the drop of a hat: It begins to resemble cheerleading. It would be virtually inconceivable for news reports to treat McCain's Democratic rivals this way. Try to imagine a 157-word article about Barack Obama seeking treatment for skin cancer that notes in passing that he opposed the Iraq war in 2002, or an article about Hillary Clinton introducing port security legislation that casually notes her years of work on behalf of children. Seems pretty unlikely, doesn't it?

But non-sequiturs like that occur regularly in coverage of McCain. The effect is to constantly remind voters of what may be the most admirable thing about him, enhancing his reputation on security issues.

Which isn't to say that voters are the only people affected in this way by media coverage of McCain. Reporters apparently are, as well. *The Washington Post* [reported](#) this week: "Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), the war hero and likely Republican nominee who once dismissed Obama for misspelling 'flak jacket,' has also belittled his credentials, accusing him last week of making ill-informed comments about Iraq and al-Qaeda."

Had the *Post* actually looked into the merits of McCain's "flak jacket" attack on Obama rather than assuming that the "war hero" must be correct, the paper might have told readers the truth. The truth is that McCain once falsely accused Obama of misspelling "flak jacket" and that it was McCain who was wrong about the spelling of "flak." (After a written statement from Obama referred to "flack jackets," McCain issued a statement purporting to correct Obama's spelling: "By the way, Senator Obama, it's a 'flak' jacket, not a 'flack' jacket." But McCain was wrong, [as Media Matters has repeatedly noted](#). Multiple dictionaries indicate that both spellings are acceptable, and numerous official U.S. military websites use Obama's spelling. Several reporters have nevertheless repeated McCain's attack on Obama without noting that he was wrong.)

The media's constant repetition of McCain's war record also serves to inoculate him from criticism. Indeed, media outlets sometimes explicitly invoke McCain's service in response to completely unrelated criticism of him. And this appears to be something McCain himself is encouraging.

In February, former Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole wrote a letter to Rush

Limbaugh asking Limbaugh to go easy on McCain. In response, Mitt Romney, who was then running against McCain for this year's GOP nomination, said that he wouldn't have had Dole write a letter on his behalf, explaining that "there are a lot of folks that tend to think that maybe John McCain's race is a bit like Bob Dole's race -- that it's the guy who's the next in line; he's the inevitable choice and we'll give it to him, and then, it won't work."

In response, McCain [denounced](#) Romney for "disparaging an American hero" -- a reference to Dole's service in World War II. In case McCain's point wasn't clear, he added: "I think Governor Romney should apologize to Bob Dole for that comment. He's a great American, and for Governor Romney, who has never had any military experience, to disparage the service and courage of an American hero, I think is disgraceful." And again, just in case there was anyone who still didn't get the point: "[T]o disparage a great American hero like Senator Bob Dole, who led our Republicans in the Senate? I mean, that's -- an apology is in order."

Romney's comments about Dole had absolutely nothing to do with Dole being "an American hero," absolutely nothing to do with Dole's "service and courage." Romney's own lack of "military experience" was completely irrelevant. The standard McCain seemed to be setting was that because of Dole's military service, it is "disgraceful" to criticize him in any way -- *even if the criticism has nothing to do with his service.*

That's a pretty convenient standard for McCain to set, given his own war record. It is also completely irrational. It almost goes without saying that the media ate it up with a spoon. MSNBC aired portions of McCain's attacks on Romney without noting that Romney had not in any way disparaged Dole's service, as did NBC's *Nightly News with Brian Williams*. Other news reports similarly repeated McCain's attacks without indicating that they were false -- and, of course, without explaining that McCain was in effect declaring that Dole's service renders *any* criticism of him inappropriate.

A few weeks later, McCain more directly benefited from the apparent willingness of some reporters to stipulate to McCain's premise that any criticism of a candidate who has served in the military is out of bounds. (Any *Republican* candidate that is: Neither McCain nor the media applied that standard to past Democratic candidates like Al Gore and John Kerry, both of whom served in Vietnam.)

On February 20, MSNBC aired a clip of Barack Obama saying, "The American people understand that the last thing we need is to have the same old folks doing the same old things making the same mistakes over and over and over again." MSNBC anchor Contessa Brewer then said: "Obama has used that line today, but this time the world 'old' seemed to pop up with more frequency. Was he taking aim at John McCain's age, an American war hero?"

Set aside for a moment the fact that Obama hadn't even mentioned McCain in the comments in question. Assume for a moment that Obama was talking about McCain. Pretend that his reference to doing the "same old things" and making the "same mistakes" really was a clever way to reference McCain's advanced age, as Brewer guessed. What in the world does McCain being "an American war hero" have to do with Obama's comments?

Nothing. Not a damn thing. In fact, just a few sentences after the comments MSNBC aired, Barack Obama [made clear](#) the difference between criticizing McCain and criticizing his service:

OBAMA: I revere and honor John McCain's service to this country. He is a genuine American hero. But when he embraces George Bush's failed economic policies, when he says that he is

willing to send our troops into another 100 years of war in Iraq, then he represents the policies of yesterday. And we want to be the party of tomorrow. And I'm looking forward to having that debate with John McCain.

And yet MSNBC pretends that Obama's criticism of McCain -- if that is even what he was doing -- is about McCain being "an American war hero."

What's next? Are MSNBC anchors going to respond to Democratic criticism of McCain's tax cuts for the rich by invoking McCain's service? Will they indignantly point to his time as a prisoner of war the next time someone criticizes McCain for not having an economic plan, or opposing universal health care?

If this is going to be how the media cover this campaign -- invoking McCain's status as a war hero every time anyone dares criticize him, or even hints at criticism of him, or even *might have* hinted at criticism of him -- they may as well just start wearing "McCain For President" buttons on their lapels and drop the charade that they are anything but in the tank for him.

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1625 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20036