Behind McCain, Outsider in Capital Wanting Back In

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The New York Times
Published: October 17, 2008

Cindy McCain was new to Washington and not yet 30 when she arrived at a luncheon for Congressional spouses to discover a problem with her name tag.

It read “Carol McCain.” That was the well-liked wife John McCain had left to marry Cindy, to the disapproval of many in Washington.

Fearing that the slight was intentional, she slinked to a half-empty table that never filled. “No one wanted to sit at her table,” said Barbara Ross, a friend who was not surprised when Mrs. McCain announced a few months later that she was moving back to Arizona. “It was like high school.”

Cindy McCain, the wife of the Republican presidential nominee, has spent the last year pursuing a return to Washington: “a harsh town” that does not suit her, she has said.

Nor does campaigning, friends say. She has done relatively few solo events, grants interviews reluctantly— she declined to speak for this article — and in introducing her husband at events, she offers few of the heartwarming anecdotes that are the stock in trade of the political spouse. When she finishes, she stands silently behind him, sometimes with an approving smile, sometimes looking strained.

From the start, Mrs. McCain’s marriage has been defined by her husband’s ambitions, and despite her sometimes punishing ride in political life, she does whatever she must to help fulfill them. As his poll numbers have slid recently, her devotion has seemed only to grow. When the McCain campaign recently stepped up attacks on Senator Barack Obama, Mrs. McCain joined in with startling intensity. The day after the second presidential debate, which did not turn around Mr. McCain’s standing in the polls, she interrupted a Fox News interview he was doing to testify to his virtues. At this late date, Mrs. McCain is starting to headline her own rallies, starting in Pennsylvania on Saturday.

“She would walk on broken glass barefoot if it required her to do so in this campaign,” said
Matt Salmon, a former Arizona congressman who knows the couple.

Mrs. McCain, 54, describes herself as her husband’s best friend, though for the last two decades they have mostly lived apart, she in Arizona, he in Washington. She initially seemed like an ideal political partner, giving Mr. McCain a home state, money and contacts that jump-started his career. But as the years passed, she also became a liability at times. She played a role in the Keating Five savings-and-loan scandal, and just as her husband was rehabilitating his reputation, she was caught stealing drugs from her nonprofit organization to feed her addiction to painkillers. She has a fortune that sets the McCains apart from most other Americans, a problem in a presidential race that hinges on economic anxieties. She can be imprecise: she has repeatedly called herself an only child, for instance, even though she has two half-siblings, and has provided varying details about a 1994 mercy mission to Rwanda.

Those close to Mrs. McCain say she aspires to be like another blonde, glamorous figure married to an older man: Diana, the Princess of Wales. Mrs. McCain sought out the same mine-clearing organization that the princess supported, joining its board and traveling to minefields, just as her role model had. Mrs. McCain recently told British reporters that as first lady, she would take her cues from Diana, throwing herself into international philanthropy.

First, though, the McCains must win. Mrs. McCain has traveled by her husband’s side on the campaign trail and helped reorganize the campaign after it floundered in 2007. When The New York Times reported last winter that Mr. McCain’s staffers had urged him to stay away from a female lobbyist during his first presidential run, Mrs. McCain stood by her husband at a news conference and defended his honor.

Politics have always brought the McCains together: as she remarked during his failed 2000 presidential run, campaigns are when the two spend the most time with each other.

“Just when I think we’re complete opposites, it turns out we’re not, that we’ve had a common goal — first the children and now this,” she told Harper’s Bazaar last year.

Washington Experiences

Some of Mr. McCain’s Washington friends say they have barely met Mrs. McCain, while fellow mothers at their children’s schools say they have little sense of her husband. The two often relax in separate places: Mr. McCain prefers the family’s ranch in the Arizona desert, while Mrs. McCain’s refuge is a high-rise condominium on the Pacific. (Her husband is
“not a beach person,” she recently told Vogue.)

From the beginning, John and Cindy McCain had two entirely different experiences of Washington. He was the most popular member of the freshman Congressional class of 1983, with the most heroic background, the most uproarious jokes and, from his days as the Senate’s Navy liaison, the highest-level contacts. “John was clearly the star from the first day,” said Steve Bartlett, a former congressman from Texas.

Mrs. McCain was 28, nearly two decades younger than her husband and just five years older than his eldest-son. “Cindy was a little bit star struck by John’s fame and the strength of his personality,” said Diana Dunn, who socialized with the couple. Ms. Dunn, the former wife of William S. Cohen, the former Maine senator and defense secretary, recalls the new Mrs. McCain as gracious but timid, unschooled in Washington conversation, and worried about fitting in.

Carol McCain was still a presence on the social scene, working in the Reagan White House and as an events planner. Everyone knew her story: she had stood by her husband during his captivity in North Vietnam, never passing word of a debilitating car accident, only to discover, a few years after their reunion, that he was leaving her for a younger, richer woman.

Rejected by the clubby Congressional wives, Cindy McCain tried to befriend her husband’s aides.

“She seemed lonely,” said Lisa Boepple, a former chief of staff. But “she was John’s wife, so we didn’t really want to hang around with her.”

Mrs. McCain announced she was returning to Phoenix to start a family, but friends detected other reasons. “I think Cindy made an intellectual decision: I could stay here and fight this, or I could go and do more productive things,” said Ms. Ross, the friend from back home.

Ever since, the McCains have led only partly overlapping lives, with Mr. McCain — who was first elected to the Senate in 1986 — spending the week in Washington. The separation had a political upside: Mr. McCain, initially considered something of a carpetbagger, boasted that his family lived in Arizona. He flew home on weekends, but spent part of them campaigning.

In his absence, Mrs. McCain organized elaborate fund-raisers, like a “South Pacific” affair to complement his naval background, complete with Polynesian dancers. She shopped for
thoughtful gifts: engraved silver platters to give to staff members on primary night, gold elephant lapel pins, and gag presents, like a cowboy outfit for Victoria Clark, then an aide who knew little about the West. For his district offices, she ordered native Arizonan plants — which all promptly died, according to Peggy Rubach, a former aide.

Mrs. McCain expanded her childhood home, turning it into a 10,000-square-foot mansion that struck more than one visitor as a shrine to her husband. On the walls, she hung photos of the storied McCain military clan and her husband clasping hands with Republican presidents. Elephants adorned the wallpaper in one bathroom and a pot rack in the kitchen. In the master suite, she installed a fireplace carved with “MC,” for McCain.

When he was home, the two were “as affectionate as you can be with John McCain,” said Wes Gullet, a former aide, explaining that his old boss, with his military training, restless energy and sarcastic humor, is not the cuddly type. “He’s a funny and vivacious guy, but he is not someone who spends his weekend watching ‘The Way We Were,’ ” Mr. Gullet said.

Recently, Mrs. McCain has called the separations painful, volunteering that she endured several miscarriages alone. She spent subsequent pregnancies mostly confined to home, Ms. Ross said, sitting in a favorite stuffed chair, watching videos. But she rarely complained. “Her attitude was as a good soldier,” Mr. Gullet said.

As her family grew, her parents moved across the street to help out, even ordering birthday gifts to be given in her husband’s name. “I’m sure John hasn’t been able to get anything done, so send something Cindy would enjoy,” Marguerite Hensley, Mrs. McCain’s mother, would tell G. Darrell Olson, a local jeweler. “John doesn’t have a lot of money, so find something in the $5,000 area,” she added, according to Mr. Olson. (One year, Mr. McCain chose his own gift for his wife: a ring with her children’s birthstones.)

Mr. McCain regretted his absences, but he saw himself as an improvement on his own father and grandfather. “John’s dad had gone to war on Dec. 7” — the day Pearl Harbor was attacked — “and didn’t come home for years at a time,” Mr. Gullet said.

**Scandal and an Addiction**

Whatever humiliation Mrs. McCain suffered in her first Washington foray, her trips there in 1989, for weeks of Senate hearings on the savings-and-loan scandal, were worse.

“I can remember once during that time, Cindy saying she didn’t know how she was going to get up in the morning,” Ms. Ross said. For the ever-present news cameras, Mrs. McCain
developed what Ms. Ross called “that stone face” — an impassive mask.

Her husband was accused of improperly intervening on behalf of a donor, Charles Keating, whose failed savings and loan had cost taxpayers billions. Four other senators were implicated, and one Senate spouse: Mrs. McCain. She and her father had invested in a shopping center with Mr. Keating, and while Mr. McCain insisted that he had reimbursed Mr. Keating for vacations their families had taken together in the Bahamas, he said his wife, the family bookkeeper, could not find the receipts.

Mrs. McCain busied herself with the American Voluntary Medical Team, a charity she founded to supply medical equipment and expertise to some of the neediest places on earth, like Micronesia, Vietnam and Kuwait in the weeks after the Persian Gulf war.

When Mrs. McCain visited Bangladesh after a cyclone, she stopped at an orphanage founded by Mother Teresa, who was not, as the campaign has said, present for the visit. Mrs. McCain returned with two baby girls; Mr. Gullet later adopted one, and Mrs. McCain informed her husband on landing that they would adopt the other.

In 1994, Mrs. McCain dissolved the charity after admitting that she had been addicted to painkillers for years and had stolen prescription drugs from it. She had used the drugs, first given for back pain, to numb herself during the Keating Five investigation, she confessed to Newsweek magazine. “The newspaper articles didn’t hurt as much, and I didn’t hurt as much,” she wrote in an essay. “The pills made me feel euphoric and free.”

The scandal broke just as her husband had been trying to rehabilitate his reputation. He had no idea his wife had been an addict, he told the press.

**On the Trail**

Mrs. McCain has said that the smears during her husband’s 2000 presidential bid — he was accused of fathering a black child, a twisted reference to their daughter from Bangladesh — left her skittish about presidential politics.

Observers of that campaign and the current one say she seems different this time — more guarded, more tense, superthin. She rarely campaigns away from her husband’s side, and yet their interactions on the trail often appear brief and formal. During the rolling primary-season seminars that Mr. McCain held in the back of his bus, Mrs. McCain sat up front. Once in a while, she joined him, sitting very straight, smiling and saying little. Physically, she seems fragile: she suffers from migraines, hobbled around on crutches last year after a knee injury and recently wore a wrist brace because of a handshaking injury.
In speaking about each other, the McCains use standard lines: she praises his experience, he tells the crowd that she should really be the candidate. Meghan McCain, their daughter, performs the image-softening role spouses usually perform for each other: on her blog, she depicts her father joking around on campaign planes and her mother in polka-dot pajamas. On Friday, Mrs. McCain made rare contact with the reporters covering her husband, distributing Halloween candy and gaily advising, “Make your dentist happy!”

In interviews, some of Mrs. McCain’s statements seem questionable. She often tells of how she moved to California, leaving her children behind, for four months in 2004 to recover from a stroke that left her unable to walk or speak. But news reports from the time indicate she had few discernible impediments. She gave interviews four days afterward, attended a baseball game with her husband and a reporter several weeks later, and spoke at a Tempe, Ariz., Chamber of Commerce event. “One month out, I feel wonderful,” she told the audience. The McCain campaign declined to resolve the discrepancy.

Similarly, Mrs. McCain often mentions her travels to Rwanda at the height of the 1994 genocide — she wrote about it in a recent Wall Street Journal opinion piece and has been praised by politicians and newspaper columnists for jetting into the heart of a massacre. As with her other charity trips, participants praised her eagerness to help victims of tragedy. But news accounts and interviews indicate, and a campaign spokesman confirmed, that Mrs. McCain traveled after the genocide had ended, spending time with refugees in neighboring Zaire, now Congo. Asked if she was ever in Rwanda, as Mrs. McCain has stated many times, a campaign spokesman, Jill Hazelbaker, said “she was driven to the Zaire/Rwanda border in order to assess the conditions of the refugees entering the country.”

Whatever stumbles she may have made in telling her story, Mrs. McCain has exhibited the signal trait of the political spouse: a burning desire to win. In summer 2007, she helped reorganize her husband’s campaign after it almost fell apart, sitting down with the books to review the cash-flow. Rick Davis, a contentious figure in the McCain camp because of his lobbying ties, emerged as campaign manager, in part because Mrs. McCain, with whom he spent months traveling and fund-raising, backed him.

“It was at a time when most people had given up on John,” said Mr. Salmon, the former Arizona congressman. “When he was down, Cindy was extremely positive.”

Asked to explain how Mrs. McCain can seem so uncomfortable on the trail and yet so intent on victory, friends say she truly believes that her husband is the best man for the job.
Some note she has invested for decades in his career and now sees the ultimate prize in reach; others say she wants approval, from either her husband or the public. At a Florida rally on Thursday, the crowd greeted her with chants of “Cin-dy! Cin-dy!”

If Mr. McCain wins, she would have to return to the town she says she dislikes, attending the same sorts of luncheons she once fled from. But this time — maybe at the annual event that Congressional wives have for the first lady — the women of Washington, including a few who shunned her the first time around, would have to applaud in Mrs. McCain’s honor.

*Kitty Bennett and Mark Leibovich contributed reporting.*