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WASHINGTON, Feb. 25 -- In his tiny cubicle in the Russell Senate Office Building, in the lowest foothills of political power, a frustrated Navy officer wrestled with friends over what to do with his life.***

On top of that, his personal life was a mess: Although he was still living with his wife, he was aggressively courting a 25-year-old woman who was as beautiful as she was rich.

***In just a few years from those times of soul-searching in his office as Navy liaison to the Senate, Mr. McCain would have a new wife, a new home state and a bright new political star as president of the class of newly elected Republican members of the House of Representatives.

For a candidate running on character and biography, it is also an awkward time to remember: Mr. McCain abandoned his wife, who had reared their three children while he was in Vietnamese prisons, and he then began his political career with the resources of his new wife's family.

Yet although Mr. McCain's children and some friends were angry and disappointed with him at the time, they rally around him today. No candidate could be luckier in his choice of an ex-wife than Senator McCain, and he must be the only politician around who could cheat on his wife and divorce her and still get her support and her campaign contributions today. Even her friends rave about him.

*** Mr. McCain and his present wife, Cindy, both declined to be interviewed about that period for this article.

The story began when Vietnam released Mr. McCain and other prisoners of war in March 1973. He stepped off a military transport plane on crutches, an instant war hero, and quickly had a painful shock. His wife, Carol, a tall, slim woman who had once been a model, had nearly died in a car wreck in 1969. H. Ross Perot, the businessman and advocate of prisoners of war, had paid for her medical care, but the injuries left her four inches shorter and on crutches, and she had gained a good deal of weight. Mr. McCain was no great shakes to look at himself. He was still troubled by two broken arms, a broken leg, a shattered knee and bayonet wounds. Few thought that he could ever fly again, but he was desperate to try.

Mr. McCain has acknowledged running around with women and accepted responsibility for the breakup of the marriage, without going into details. But his supporters and his biographer, Robert Timberg, all suggest that the marriage had already effectively ended and that the couple had separated by the time he met Cindy, his present wife.

That might be the most soothing way of explaining a politician's divorce from a disabled wife and his remarriage to a wealthy heiress, but it does not jibe with accounts of family members and friends.

John and Carol McCain had separated once briefly after they moved to Washington, when he moved his gear into his mother's house on Connecticut Avenue. That was the first hint that Joe McCain, John's younger brother, had of any marital problems, for neither John nor Carol confided much about personal problems.

"I remember asking him one time," Joe McCain recalled. "I said: 'You don't look so happy. You want to talk about it?' And he said, 'No, pal.' "

That separation lasted about two weeks and was not repeated until the final split, said their son Andy, and even close family friends never knew about it. To outsiders, who often visited the McCain household, the marriage seemed as close as ever.

"They were definitely living together as man and wife when I was there," recalled Mr. Smith, the former instructor pilot, who moved to Washington and lived with the McCains in their home from about February through May 1979. "And there were no signs of strain.

"For somebody to say that they were separated or at each other's throats is just nonsense," Mr. Smith said.

Yet at precisely the time that Mr. Smith was a guest in what appeared to be a happy household, in April 1979, Mr. McCain accompanied a group of senators on a trip to China. The Navy threw a big cocktail party for the group during a stopover in Honolulu.

"John and I were talking, and then somebody tapped me on the shoulder and I turned around and exchanged a few words," said Albert A. Lakeland, then a Senate staff member. "When I turned around, John was gone. I looked around, and he was making a beeline for this very attractive blond woman.

"He spent the whole party talking to her, and he kept avoiding me when I approached," Mr. Lakeland said. After the reception, Mr. McCain and the young woman, Cindy Hensley, went out to dinner, and the romance blossomed.

Mr. McCain continued to pursue Miss Hensley, calling her to keep in touch. When she thanked him for sending flowers that had just arrived (signed "John") he said it was nothing. As she discovered years later, they were from another man named John.

Over the next six months, Mr. McCain pursued Miss Hensley aggressively, flying around the country to

see her, and he began to push to end his marriage. Friends say that Carol McCain was in shock.

Late that year, the McCains finally separated, and Mrs. McCain accepted a divorce the next February. Mr. McCain promptly married Miss Hensley, his present wife.

The first Mrs. McCain never seems to have said a harsh word about Mr. McCain (nor he about her), and was discreet even with friends.***

Mr. McCain's three children in the first marriage were less forgiving at first, and none of them were in attendance when he married Cindy. No one blamed Cindy, however, for she seemed shy and it was clear that Mr. McCain had been the pursuer.

"I was certainly disappointed and mad at Dad," remembered Andy, who said it took almost four years for his anger to evaporate. He added: "I hold him responsible. I don't hold Cindy responsible a bit."

Some old friends believe that Mr. McCain was as restless in the marriage as in the Navy, and that he was actively looking for a new wife when he met Cindy.

"My take on it was that the marriage had come unglued," said George Day, an old friend who represented Mr. McCain as a lawyer in the divorce. "Then what happened with meeting Cindy, was that he had already made the decision to get divorced."

Some family friends were appalled that a man who seemed so decent, so full of compassion for anyone who needed help, could treat his own wife in a manner they regarded as brutal. But Mr. McCain gradually won everyone around again, with the same traits he now displays after making a mistake: a combination of charm and penitence.

It helped that Mr. McCain always accepted blame -- embraced it -- rather than making excuses.

"He has always felt very guilty about it," Mr. McGovern said. "I have never talked with him for more than 40 minutes when he didn't bring it up, saying he felt badly about it."

So John and Carol McCain managed to remain friends, and she has backed him in all his campaigns.

"I'm crazy about John McCain and I love him to pieces," Carol McCain said, "but I'm just not going to do any interviews."

Likewise, his children have all gotten over their anger, to the point that their son Doug chose his father to be best man at his wedding. ***
